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562 Article XII. The Attitude Toward the Bride Price

1. What is the woman's attitude toward the bride price?

Only we Europeans can ask such a question. To the Nkundó mind it is superfluous -- in fact it is really stupid. The bride-price system is the normal system [178] of marriage. The Nkundó do not conceive of marriage in any other way. Without the payment of a bride price there is no marriage; the woman is not considered to be a wife, she is simply a slave. This notion is a necessary consequence of the bride-price system. Thus it is not surprising that the woman is very much attached to this system, and that under normal conditions -- that is, when there is no European influence -- she does not want any union without a bride price, for she would then be a slave. This is obvious. All these ideas are held together like the links of a chain.

2. Our attitude toward the bride price

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618 At the beginning of colonization the Europeans, government agents as well as missionaries, viewed with repugnance a marriage system based on the payment of a bride price. In their eyes it was neither more nor less than the sale of women and therefore a form of slavery. They felt they should counteract it by abolishing the bride price and introducing marriage in the European manner, which seemed more consistent with man's free nature. Many Blacks employed by the Whites as soldiers, laborers, etc., were thus married without bride price. Nevertheless, no direct action was taken against the system. Later it became apparent that it would be harmful to abolish this ancestral custom before it was possible to replace it with a better system. (1) In the end it was realized that the payment

1. It is not even enough to substitute a better system; those who are to benefit from it must understand it and be convinced that it is better.

583[x] of a bride price was not at all a purchase. (2) [179]
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2. One reason why Europeans were so slow in getting a realistic picture of the nature of the bride price was undoubtedly their lack of linguistic knowledge. The natives did not know the Lobangi language spoken to them first nor the Lingala used later, and so perforce in these languages they used (and still use) terms whose meaning is vague and broad. Thus they said -- and still often say -- the word sómba, "to buy," for "marriage," although their own language contains terms which are very precise.

Having gradually become informed as to the true nature of the bride price, a number of Europeans began to favor a return to the old system. Some took a radical and intransigent stand on the matters; others approached the question in a more reasonable manner, taking into account the changes that had resulted from colonization. It was perceived that the natives were not yet ready for the abolition of their ancestral laws and that marriages without a bride price rarely lasted, in part because the old sanctions had not been replaced with new measures adapted to the circumstances. Finally the government as well as the missions more or less strictly required that the matter of the bride price be settled before a "civil" or a "religious" marriage ceremony.

583[x] 182 Many Europeans wish for the abolition of the bride-price system because it seems inferior to them. And actually in the present circumstances of time and place, it does constitute an obstacle to the evolution of the natives toward a better social and moral condition. (1)

1. This is especially true of the consequences of the nkita system.

But such an abolition is neither practicable nor expedient. This system penetrates and molds, so to speak, the whole familial and social life

628 Some time thereafter, a man named Bengóngó from the Ndongó vil-
602 lage of the Bongíli went to Bofílá to visit his sister Bosáka, who was married to Eale ea Bofekó. The latter told him that the village was enraged because of the assassination of one of their people by the Batswa of the Bongíli. He advised him to go [295] and hide in the fallow ground lest excited men come upon him and revenge themselves on him. He led his brother-in-law there himself. Therefore he knew the exact location of his hiding place and ran to betray him
[266] to the others. They encircled the fallow ground and easily found poor Bengóngó, who was pitilessly massacred and eaten. His sister Bosáka never knew of her husband's treachery; she thought that despite all his precautions, the other inhabitants had discovered her brother's hiding place. (1)

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1. We should not be too astonished that during that period the Europeans did not intervene in these wars, vendettas, massacres, and acts of cannibalism. They let the natives do as they pleased among themselves and demanded only that they leave them alone and render them services and tribute. They had other things to do in those times. The white men Ámbá and Baisánkoi, of whom the natives still speak with respectful fear, were the first to begin punishing acts of barbarism in this region.

602 This hypocrisy on the part of the husband toward his wife and brother-in-law is due to the presence of two opposing feelings within him -- on the one hand, the love of his family and the feeling of solidarity which engenders hate and the desire for vengeance; on the other, love for his spouse. As these feelings are in complete contradiction with each other, he cannot reconcile them. But at least he can preserve appearances.

[539] This situation is referred to in the following proverb: bokílo ákwísáká, wéngoyak'eyalo, "if your bokílo has hidden you, change

595 831 × And it is not difficult to understand this fact. For indeed polygamy constitutes a legitimate and easy means by which a man may enjoy several women without being bothered by palavers, difficulties, etc. The mentality of many men who care little about moral laws as well as the tendency of a disordered instinct to multiply its objects only confirm this observation. Often one sees men who were monogamists at first begin by taking a second wife out of passion. Then gradually their passion becomes greater rather than appeased, and so a harem is built up progressively.

595 178 × The changes introduced by colonization in the economic life of this people have not resulted in a decrease of polygamy. In the absence of exact figures we must be satisfied with simple visual observations, but in certain regions one has the impression that the harems have become smaller but, on the other hand, that the number of polygamists has increased, and therefore [375] the desire for polygamy, that is, its affective cause, has [651] not diminished. Nor does the extra tax frighten or stop the polygamists. The great means for changing the Nkundó attitude in this realm will always be the action of the missions and the penetration of Christian ethics, seconded by a government attitude favoring monogamy. (1)

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1. The favorable attitude of the colonial government toward monogamy is expressed chiefly in the permission given to a polygamist's extra wives to abandon their husband in order to contract a monogamous union, preferably in a mission, under the supervision of missionaries.

[177] Another means, undoubtedly secondary but still important, is the example of European couples. The Blacks are imitative, and native women envy the lot of the white woman, so that European households are propaganda for monogamy when they behave well.